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United States
Department of
Agriculture



Food Safety
and Quality
Service

Poultry Inspection

Each year over 4 billion birds are slaughtered and inspected by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Chickens comprise about 96 percent of the slaughter, and the remainder includes turkeys, ducks, geese, and guinea fowl.

The Federal Meat and Poultry Inspection Program is responsible for assuring that poultry is wholesome, safe, and truthfully labeled. The program is operated by the Food Safety and Quality Service. Although inspection of red meat became mandatory in 1907, inspection of poultry was not mandatory until January 1, 1959 after passage of the Poultry Products Inspection Act in 1957. Until that time, inspection of poultry was voluntary.

Since then, the poultry industry has experienced significant growth. Total volume of poultry product slaughtered under Federal inspection in 1979 amounted to nearly 14 billion pounds, compared to about 5 billion pounds in 1960.

The inspection law covers all raw carcass poultry sold in interstate commerce (except for small farm flocks) as well as all processed poultry products such as frozen dinners and soups. FSQS conducts poultry inspection in about 3,000 slaughtering and processing plants.

In recent years, inflation and expanded production have been straining the Department's inspection budget.

To help control costs and preserve consumer protection, the Food Safety and Quality Service is reviewing inspection procedures to determine more efficient ways to inspect poultry and poultry products. The savings could thus be used to strengthen other segments of the inspection program, such as detection of chemical residues.

Recently, the inspection process has been made more efficient, allowing inspectors to increase the rates of inspection. This provides a savings in program costs, boosting the amount of poultry that can be inspected by the same number of inspectors to help industry meet increased demand for poultry products.

How Poultry is Inspected

Inspection of birds is conducted before and after slaughter. Before slaughter, USDA inspectors examine the live poultry to detect signs of disease. Birds which have already died are automatically condemned and not allowed to enter the slaughterhouse. After slaughter, each carcass and the internal organs are examined for signs of disease or conditions which would make all

or part of the carcass unfit for human food. To assure uniformity and effectiveness of the inspection process, full-time USDA veterinarians supervise the post-mortem inspection procedures and other duties performed by the inspectors.

Most young chickens, or fryers, are now inspected under a procedure known as Modified Traditional Inspection, which makes use of a mirror. Implemented in April 1979, the procedure increases the rate at which inspectors can work. Three inspectors are placed on each line--an 'outside' inspector who looks at the outside of the bird and two 'inside' inspectors who examine the internal organs and inside of the carcass. The outside inspector does not have to turn the birds because a mirror behind the carcass makes all surfaces visible. And the procedures or hand motions for inside-the-carcass inspection have been redesigned. Fewer hand motions are now used to check the inside of the carcass as well as the internal organs. As a result, inspection time and money is saved, and the inspector's job is less tiring.

Under traditional inspection procedures, each inspector was required to make a complete examination of each slaughtered bird and all its parts. That meant extensive handling of the bird by the inspector. The new modified traditional inspection procedure was tested before being put into practice and found to be as effective as the traditional system in protecting the consumer.

Since the inside inspectors still handle the bird, it takes two of them to keep up with one outside inspector who doesn't handle the bird. With the reduced hand motions of Modified Traditional Inspection, a three-inspector team can examine up to 23 percent more birds per minute than was possible by using the traditional inspection system.

Another technique currently being tested is "hands-off" inspection. Under this procedure, the inspector does not touch either the internal organs or the carcass. This method eliminates the hand motions used to maneuver the viscera and open the bird, and to tilt it to examine the inside of the carcass. However, the use of this inspection technique depends on the development of new equipment that will mechanically open the birds so the inspectors will have an unobstructed view. Tests have begun on equipment that may make "hands-off" possible.

FSQS is considering other ways to lower inspection costs. One method would use trained plant employees to remove questionable birds from the line before they are presented to the inspector. However, these trained plant employees would have no authority to pass for food any of the birds they handle. They would simply retain the questionable birds for examination by a Federal inspector who would make the final decision and disposition. If successfully implemented, this technique might save time by helping gather suspect birds for the inspector. Plant employees can take birds off a line, but this is not part of the accepted FSQS inspection process.

Another area of study is flock testing. Since most poultry, especially broilers, are raised in a highly controlled environment, the condition of birds in a flock tends to be quite uniform. It may be possible to determine the condition by examining records and inspecting representative samples from the flock before it is sent to the slaughterhouse. This information would help FSQS inspectors determine the degree of inspection a flock would be given. Flock testing would seem to be particularly appropriate in the light of dropping disease rates among poultry. While broiler production has been increasing, the incidence of disease has fallen sharply. In 1969, inspectors condemned 3 percent of the birds they examined. That figure had fallen to slightly more than 1 percent a decade later in 1979.

Processed Poultry Products

Much of the poultry slaughtered in this country is used in frozen dinners, soups, poultry frankfurters and other processed products which are also subject to the inspection laws. Manufacturers of poultry products must use cooking, cooling, and mixing methods approved by FSQS. FSQS personnel must also approve the ingredients used and the label for each product. The FSQS inspector uses these approved methods, recipes, and labels as yardsticks to determine whether the processing is being conducted in a manner to produce a safe and truthfully labeled product. Should the product not meet FSQS standards, it will not be approved for marketing.

FSQS has proposed a modernization of the inspection of processed products through a system termed "Voluntary Quality Control." Under this system, the inspectors could use information collected in a firm's approved quality-control system to ensure the products meet FSQS safety and labeling requirements.

National Residue Program

Another aspect of Federal inspection is the National Residue Program which seeks to detect chemical residues in animal tissue, pinpoint violations, and keep violative residues out of poultry products. Residues are produced from a number of sources--improper use of pesticides and herbicides, improper withdrawal of drugs and medicated feeds from birds before slaughter, and industrial accidents which result in contamination of poultry feeds or the environment where food animals are raised. The regular inspections before and after slaughter generally don't detect the presence or absence of chemical and drug residues. Therefore, Federal inspectors regularly take samples of tissue from slaughtered birds for laboratory testing. Should the residues show above-tolerance or dangerous amounts of toxic substances, the poultry from that source is not permitted to enter food channels and commerce until the flock is tested again by USDA and cleared as safe for food.

Some poultry producers operate their own residue programs, working with FSQS to detect any violative residues and removing contaminated product from food channels.

Enforcement

Monitoring of the wholesomeness and proper labeling of poultry products continues even after they leave the slaughtering or processing plant. FSQS compliance officers visit such businesses as warehouses, transportation companies, and retail stores to look for labeling violations and spoiled or contaminated products. If products are not in compliance with Federal requirements, they are removed from the marketing chain through detention, seizure, or other appropriate actions. Products determined to be unsafe for human consumption must be properly disposed of by the owner.

Enforcement methods to deal with violations include criminal prosecution, injunction, warning letter, and, in some cases, withdrawal or suspension of inspection services. By suspending inspection, a plant is effectively shut down until significant changes are made in its management or operations.

If poultry or poultry products are approved by FSQS for wholesomeness and labeling accuracy, they will receive the official mark of inspection. Although visible on all consumer-packaged frozen and processed products, the mark may not always appear on fresh poultry which has been bulk shipped and then packaged at the retail level.

The number at the bottom of the stamp identifies the establishment where the product was produced.

The Food Safety and Quality Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, offers its programs to all eligible persons regardless of race, color, sex, religion, age, national origin, or handicap.

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